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Israelis' Lebanon pullout concludes ill-starred venture

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For all practical purposes, Israel has finally concluded its costly invasion of Lebanon almost to the day that it began three years ago.

The end of the occupation is certain to become a watershed in Israel's history, the first military venture that raised domestic political opposition and, for a good part of its population, fell far short of its aims.

Only 150 Israeli troops now remain in Lebanon, according to Israeli sources. At their peak after the June 6, 1982, invasion, more than 80,000 troops were deployed in the small country, the sources said.

Last Jan. 16, Prime Minister Shimon Peres' government announced it would withdraw its estimated 15,000 troops in a three-stage pullout. The decision came after months of stepped-up attacks against the Israelis by Shi'ite Moslem guerrillas in southern Lebanon.

In the first two stages, the Israelis left the area around the port of Sidon in February and Lebanon's eastern Bekaa Valley in May. A small number of Israeli soldiers remained in a 3-to 11-mile security zone in the south.

"We still have soldiers in key points," a military source said, adding, however, that most of the troops were already out.

"It [the pullout] is not a flow, it's drops now," one source said.

The sources said Israeli soldiers are handing the area over to the 2,000-man South Lebanese Army, which Israel has armed, trained and financed. The Beirut government considers the militia a renegade force and insists the Lebanese army patrol the region.

Israel's exit from Lebanon was deliberately played down by the government both to avoid exposing its troops to ambushes and to defuse the event as much as possible of symbolic meaning.

But for the Arab world, the withdrawal is seen as the first time Israel has given up Arab land under pressure of resistance by local guerrilla forces, and that claim has been a potent propaganda gain for Arab hardliners who advocate using force against Israel.

Israel originally planned to extend its phased withdrawal until September, but accelerated the schedule after determined and costly attacks by Shi'ite Moslem guerrillas in south Lebanon.

The rise of resistance by Lebanon's Shi'ite community, once

friendly toward Israel, is only one of a series of painful and unanticipated failures that resulted from the invasion and, balanced against the few successes, mark it as a high candidate for the most disastrous operation in Israel's 37-year history.

While Israel did largely succeed in its stated objective of ridding south Lebanon of the Palestine Liberation Organization and halting rocket attacks on northern Israel, the consequences of the invasion were profound and ultimately threatening to Israel.

Foremost, of course, was the sheer death and destruction loosed by the invasion. By most estimates, at least 17,000 Lebanese died during the invasion and occupation, including about 800 in the massacres at the Palestinian refugee camps near Beirut that now, ironically, have come under siege by Shi'ites.

Israel's casualties totaled 654 dead and 3,840 wounded, an enormous loss for an operation that at the beginning had been characterized as a clearing exercise expected to last only a few days and extend no more than 25 miles inside Lebanon.

Beyond the casualties, Israel suffered other losses, including the financial expense of the war, which has been estimated as high as \$3.5 billion.

In addition, for the first time there was significant popular opposition to a war that caused rifts within Israeli society. At least 130 Israeli soldiers have been charged with refusing to serve in Lebanon.

Military experts such as Zeev Schiff, defense editor of the Israeli daily Haaretz, report that morale of the army is declining and its training lagging because of the anti-guerrilla nature of the army's duties in Lebanon.

"The main lesson [of the war] is that we should not put the army in this sort of war again," Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin recently said on Israel Army Radio.

Internationally, Israel's losses have been just as great. It failed to impose a friendly government in Beirut or work out a favorable withdrawal agreement, as it tried to do with U.S. help in May 1983.

Most importantly, it failed to chase the Syrian army out of Lebanon, where about 30,000 Syrian troops remain and where Syrian influence is now pervasive.

In fact, the emergence of Syria as a stronger and more influential Arab state is probably the biggest loss of the entire invasion.

Though Israel inflicted major

losses on Syrian forces in the first weeks of the invasion, the Soviet Union was quick to rebuild the losers' military strength to the point where today some experts estimate that Syria is twice as strong as it was in 1982.

Politically, too, Syria has gained from the invasion. It is now the undisputed leader of the rejectionist camp of Arab nations and a strong influence on hardliners throughout the Arab world. Iraq, once the leading rejectionist state, is now too immersed in its war with Iran to concentrate on Arab-Israeli issues.

Additionally, the emergence of Shi'ite-Syrian influence opens the region to Iran, which offered support to Shi'ite guerrillas and enjoys the backing of Syria in its war with Iraq.

According to reports quoting intelligence sources, Syria is now poised to press its advantage, with the help of terrorist allies, to cripple Western influence in the region.

From the Syrian perspective, it has withstood an onslaught by the vaunted Israeli army, endured naval

Continued

and air bombardment by the United States, aided the successful Shi'ite resistance in south Lebanon and increased its influence over Lebanon against all attempts to weaken it.

For Israel and moderate Arab nations like Jordan and Egypt, Syria's new prominence translates into a significant gain for rejectionists.

With typical Middle East irony, however, one indirect plus may still emerge from the invasion.

Syria's new strength is one of the reasons behind the urgency being imparted to the peace process by Jordan and Egypt. For if the moderates soon do not achieve some results, then Syria's rejectionist line is likely to attract more adherents, further increasing the strength of Damascus.

That is a message that Washington seems to have finally understood, as demonstrated by the administration's sudden willingness to get involved again in the region during last week's visit by King Hussein of Jordan.

This article is based in part on wire service reports.